

Identifying & Responding to Hypothermia

Hypothermia something we're all at least somewhat aware of, especially when the temperature or wind chill dips below zero, but in truth, it doesn't have to be that cold for hypothermia to be a problem. In fact, we might be even more susceptible to falling prey to it on "nice" days because we're not on the lookout for symptoms.

Hypothermia occurs when your temperature (normally around 98.6 degrees, though that differs from person to person) drops below 95 degrees. When this happens, you may have trouble thinking clearly, talking properly, or moving well. The most insidious thing about hypothermia is that you may not realize it's happening to you — the confusion caused by hypothermia may prevent you from noticing that anything's wrong, or being able to fix it if you do.

If you'll be spending much time outdoors in cold weather (or even a short amount of time when it's below 32 degrees or there's any wind... not that we ever get wind around here), you should dress in layers, have a plan to combat hypothermia (and no, a nip or two of something alcoholic is not a good preventative — exactly the opposite, in fact), and have a buddy check up on you regularly to verify you're not showing any of the warning signs of hypothermia (see below).

But you don't actually have to be outside or in extreme cold to be affected. You can suffer from hypothermia even when temperatures are just cool, especially if you get wet (whether from snow, rain, or sweat). It's also possible to fall victim to a form of chronic or persistent hypothermia caused by spending extended periods of time in cool (not necessarily cold) environments. Under some circumstances and for some people (especially senior citizens and disabled people, but anyone can fall prey to this), even sixty degrees can be cool enough to bring on chronic hypothermia. So if you're spending time in a cool or cold location, bundle up to maintain your core body temperature and be on the lookout for the following symptoms.

Warning signs of hypothermia

Early Signs:

- Cold hands and feet
- Puffy or swollen face
- Pale skin
- Shivering (beware: if you stop shivering, that's a warning sign that you're moving into more serious hypothermia)

Later Signs:

- Slow or slurred speech
- Acting sleepy, angry, or confused
- Slow or clumsy movements, trouble walking
- Stiff, jerky arm or leg movements
- Slow or shallow breathing
- Slow or irregular heartbeat
- Blacking out/losing consciousness

Signs of Chronic or Persistent Hypothermia:

- Shivering
- Slow, slurred speech or mumbling
- Clumsiness or lack of coordination
- Drowsiness or fatigue/very low energy
- Confusion or memory loss

If you (or someone you're with) experience any of these symptoms past the first of the Early Signs, it's imperative to act quickly. Get in out of the cold, remove any wet clothing, and cover up with dry blankets or whatever's available (don't remove wet clothing if you don't have something to cover up with). If all symptoms fall within the Early Signs grouping, you should be able to safely rewarm using these methods and, if possible, something warm to drink (not something containing alcohol or caffeine, both of which increase heat loss). Avoid using heating pads or hot baths for rewarming — external heat sources can burn numbed skin, and warming a hypothermic person too quickly or jostling them too much can cause an irregular heart beat or even heart failure as extremely cold blood rushes to the heart.

If the hypothermic person stops shivering or exhibits any of the Later Signs of hypothermia, call 911 immediately. Medical care in a hospital setting is required to ensure the hypothermic person's body temperature is brought back up to normal safely and without causing additional harm.

Please share this with your friends and loved ones. And remember — use the buddy system when you need to be outside in the cold and keep an eye on each other. If the power goes out or you know people who have difficulty keeping their home warm in general, stay in touch and watch out for the more subtle, gradual signs of chronic hypothermia. If you or someone you know needs help with heating costs, there are resources available through the Colorado Low-Income Energy Assistance Program (LEAP) https://cdhs.colorado.gov/leap?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc and Energy Outreach Colorado <https://www.energyoutreach.org/bill-payment/> that can help. LEAP is federally funded, but Energy Outreach takes donations, if you'd like to help them help our neighbors.

Above all, be good neighbors and keep an eye on each other. Hypothermia can be difficult to impossible to identify in yourself and we all need to watch out for each other.